

"Aldo Leopold, St. Benedict, and the Spirituality of Reading"

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Instead of giving a lecture today what I want to do is propose a course. I mean, I still want to talk for about half an hour or so--don't get me wrong--I just want to do it in the form of a really long "rationale" section on one of those course proposal sheets.

The class I have in mind would be called "Reading." Just that. "Reading." I think of it as a three term sequence, worth 9 credits, required of everyone. Two primary texts: Oregon State's McDonald Dunn Research Forest north of town and the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. The forest, then, all 12,000 acres of it, and the Jewish-Christian Bible, all however many books. There'd also be two important secondary texts: the little sixth century instruction manual, *The Rule of St. Benedict*, to teach us how to read the Old and New Testaments; and Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*, to teach us how to read the animals and the trees.

This would be required regardless of major. Maybe the faculty should take it, too, I'm not sure, but it should happen right away in any event. It should be advertised on all our billboards and brochures, directly under "Open Doors, Open Minds."

And I'm only half kidding (although of course I'm only half serious, too). Western culture has always taken nature and the Bible as the two great books, the texts to be pored over and learned by heart, and this hypothetical class that I'm proposing merely updates that idea. My serious concern is somehow to teach the ecological imagination and intellectual humility that our students absolutely must have to survive the twenty-first century--and that the century must have to survive our students.

I'm also following Leopold's own lead. He isn't just the prophet of the conservation movement, as he is often called, and Sand County Almanac isn't just the Bible of that movement. As Wallace Stegner puts it, "when this forming civilization assembles its record of the physical and spiritual pilgrimage of the American people, the account of its stewardship in the Land of Canaan, Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* will belong in it, one of the prophetic books, the utterance of an American Isaiah." Leopold frequently quotes the Old and New Testament to illustrate a claim, but what Stegner is suggesting is deeper, that Leopold's sensibility is biblical, that his imagination works in prophetic ways, though he belonged to no church and professed no traditional creed. In an early essay called "The Forestry of the Prophets," published in 1920, Leopold even uses passages from the Old Testament to develop a notion of what he calls "Hebrew silviculture"--a fine and fanciful little piece of exactly the kind of allegorical reading that I want to recommend. The prophets, he claims, state the doctrine of conservation "as aptly as any forester of this generation." And he

So.

Let us open our Bibles to the twenty eighth chapter of Genesis and the famous story of Jacob's ladder.

The landscape of Genesis looks a little like Wisconsin, really. It's off the beaten track, unspectacular, unyielding except to the trained and loving eye. And when Jacob is running through it to escape his brother Esau he's a lot like all of us in Leopold's view, too much in hurry, too preoccupied to see anything. But then he falls asleep, a rock for a pillow. All his rational defenses fall away, and in a dream he is able to glimpse what was always already there: a mystery, an ecology, an image of vast and intricate relationship:

And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, "I am the Lord . . . I am with you and will keep you wherever you go." Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! this is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." Gen 28:10-17

Leopold rejects what he calls the "Abrahamic" understanding of the land, the idea that the earth can be bought and claimed and owned. Sometimes, too, he talks about the damage caused by the "Judeo-Christian" approach to the natural world. But in another sense, I think, he is always crying out as Jacob cries out: surely God was here and I didn't know it! Surely God is everywhere in the landscape and we didn't know it, we didn't see it, we didn't look hard enough.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

What most people don't understand about the ancient Jews and Christians is that they were in no way literalist. Fundamentalism of this sort is a nineteenth century phenomenon. The ancient mind was concerned not with the question, did this really happen, but with the question, what does this mean, what's behind it, what's are the spiritual realities hidden by the mere physical words, and that way of thinking was impelled by a sense of the mystery and complexity of truth, the conviction that things are never what they seem and that God is too grand and subtle to be reduced to fact. Modern readers assume that to find multiple meanings in the Bible is irreverent; the ancient world assumed the opposite. Each word was a gateway to heaven, and the ladder it revealed led to limitless possibilities. "Your word, Lord," writes St. Ephraem in the fourth century, "has many shades of meaning just as those who study it have many different points of view."

The Lord has hidden many treasures in his word so that each of us is enriched as we meditate on it. . . . He who comes in contact with some share of its treasure should not think that the only thing contained in the word is what he himself has found. He

should realize that he has only been able to find that one thing from among many others.

This isn't some liberal college professor deconstructing the sacred in front of horrified students. This is the mind of the ancient world, the mind that produced the Bible in the first place and then established how it should be interpreted.

And this is how, for example, in sixth century Italy, St. Benedict, the founder of Western monasticism, reads the story of Jacob's ladder:

If we want to reach the highest summit of humility, if we desire to attain speedily that exaltation in heaven to which we climb by the humility of this present life, then by our ascending actions we must set up that ladder on which Jacob in a dream saw angels descending and ascending. Without doubt, this descent and ascent can signify only that we descend by exaltation and ascend by humility. Now the ladder erected is our life on earth, and if we humble our hearts the Lord will raise it to heaven. We may call our body and soul the sides of this ladder, into which our divine vocation has fitted the various steps of humility as we ascend. (*The Rule of St. Benedict* 7:1-10).

Now, I'm not interested in the particulars of Benedict's reading so much as its technique. He's fanciful, he's imaginative, in all reverence and humility he applies the details of the story to his own given situation--as an abbot, in a monastery, trying to teach his monks how to get along--looking past the literal level of the words to what they might signify. In short, what he's doing here is reading the Bible allegorically in the way of all ancient biblical criticism. Allegorical reading: the search for the spiritual meaning. Or rather: the spiritual meanings.

The ancient world refined this method into four levels of interpretation--the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical--but we don't need to get into that here. What matters is the underlying intellectual outlook, the orientation. As the great patristic scholar Andrew Louth puts it, "the traditional doctrine of the multiple sense of Scripture, with its use of allegory, is essentially an attempt to respond to the *mira profunditas* of Scripture," to the sense of "the depth and richness of Scripture, a richness derived from the mystery to which it is the introduction, of which it is the unfolding."

What's fascinating to me, and why I'm talking about allegory on this occasion, is that Aldo Leopold is very much an allegorical reader himself. He several times uses the word "allegory," he proceeds in much the same way as St. Ephraem and St. Benedict when he interprets the texts of the natural world, and, he, too, is obviously impelled by a sense of the depth and richness of things, the complexity, the difficulty.

Let me approach it this way. In the allegorical tradition, metaphors of landscape are often used to describe the text: "Hunting truth is no easy task," St. Basil says in the fourth century. "We must look everywhere for its tracks." Much later, in the nineteenth century, Cardinal Newman compares scripture to a varied landscape full of forests and hidden valleys.

Leopold reverses the idea, repeatedly using metaphors of text to describe the

landscape. Like Basil following the tracks of truth in scripture, he follows the tracks of a January skunk, "curious to deduce his state of mind" (3). He calls the act of cutting wood "an allegory for the historian in the diverse functions of saw, wedge and axe" (17). He imagines his dog "translating" for him "the olfactory poem that who-knows-what silent creatures have written in the night" (46). The history of conservation is really "written with an ax" (73) and every farm is a "textbook on animal ecology" (86). The spaces between the whorls of branches are "an autobiography" to be read (88), the howls of wolves a mystery to be "deciphered," patterns of erosion a text "written in gullies on a thousand fields" (198). Even the structure of a steak sitting on a mound of mashed potatoes is "symbolic" for Leopold (161). The habit of allegorical reading is so deeply ingrained in Leopold that every essay or "shift" in *A Sand County Almanac* can stand as an example of extended Patristic exegesis, applied to the natural world.

And what Leopold is always searching for are clues to the vast systems and structures beyond the cycles of nature--the assumption is always of hidden meanings and the possibility of minute "disclosures," especially in a landscape that seems as otherwise plain and unadorned as the Bible first appeared in its plainness and simplicity to the arrogant Augustine (see *The Confessions*). "In country, as in people," Leopold says, "a plain exterior often conceals hidden riches, to perceive which requires much living in and with" (180). That's the ecological imagination: the capacity to believe in what isn't obvious. That's the skill of ecological analysis: the skill of reading between the lines. That's the conservation ethic: the living in and with.

And these are also the capacities of allegory. At one point in *A Sand County Almanac*, Leopold pokes fun at traditional religion. "If I were to tell the preacher of the adjoining church that the road crew has been burning history books in his cemetery, under the guise of mowing weeds, he would be amazed and uncomprehending. How could a weed be a book?" But it depends. If Basil or Benedict were the pastor, he'd understand Leopold perfectly.

The affinities are especially clear in an extended meditation on geese and other birds in the "Round River" essays:

What value has wildlife from the standpoint of morals and religion? I heard of a boy once who was brought up an atheist. He changed his mind when he saw that there were a hundred-odd species of warblers, each bedecked like to the rainbow, and each performing yearly sundry thousands of miles of migration about which scientists wrote wisely but did not understand . . . I dare say this boy's convictions would be harder to shake than those of many inductive theologians. There are yet many boys to be born who, like Isaiah, "may see, and know, and consider, and understand together, that the hand of the Lord hath done this." (231- 32)

This is the only time I know of that Leopold actually draws on the Judeo-Christian idea that nature can be read as evidence of the grandeur of God. He even quotes from Isaiah. But what's important is that the result of all of Leopold's exact and careful

reading, here and at any point in his work, is always a joyous sense of the mystery and complexity of things, however it's named, by whatever tradition--of what can't be measured, of what can't be reduced. He always comes in the end to the *mira profunditas*, or what he once calls "the imponderable essence," the "numenon of material things," the significance of which, he says, is "inexpressible in terms of contemporary science."

The end result is wonder. It's a glimpse of the ladder, of the brilliant ladder, extending off into the distance, as far as the eye can see.

So let's say you've been taking this class called "Reading," and you've been reading the Bible and St. Benedict and that other Bible, *A Sand County Almanac*, and now it's time to go out into the field. Now it's time for the first graded assignment.

A plain, unmarked van takes you out to the edge of McDonald Forest and right up to my house, right there on McDonald Circle. You're standing on my deck say, and you're looking out at the line of fir trees circling the edge of the grass in back, all of them green and more or less healthy except for a tall bare tree on the left, obviously dead, its remaining needles a dull, iron red.

Read it.

That's the assignment. Read the iron red tree.

The first thing you'd have to find out is what an arborist recently told me: that thirty years ago, in 1968, when my house was built and the yard was leveled, the roots of that fir tree were covered with ten feet of fill; that sometimes it takes years for a tree to show signs of that kind of stress but that eventually it does, withering and dying; that there's nothing I can do about the dying of the tree except cut it down--although if I leave it standing it won't really be a hazard and will even begin attracting the birds, maybe even pileated woodpeckers. It can be a snag, a real one, not like "the snag recruitments" that the College of Forestry simulated in their experimental cuts just a 100 yards deeper into the woods.

Leopold recommends a program of backyard ecology. Here it is.

What meaning can we read? What allegory is present, of shelter and growth and death?

That change is inevitable. That the truth can be slow and that the truth can be hidden, developing in ways we can't control and can't predict, over years. That we are always connected to the things around us, whether we know it or not--that we are all part of the problem--that we never escape from culture but are always bringing it with us, wherever we go--that whatever we do and fail to do has an effect over time. That even so there are compensations: the birds in the branches, the larger view of the sky.

How much further we take our interpretation, of course, depends on the ideological frameworks we bring to it--frameworks we none of us can escape, whether they're Abrahamic or pantheistic or merely economic. Leopold, for example, might go on to see the dying of the tree as another example of what he calls "the penalties of an

ecological education." For the literalists and fundamentalists, the damage inflicted on the world is invisible; all they see is short-term and surface. But to the person trained in allegory and ecology, the "marks of death" are everywhere. "One of the penalties of an ecological education," Leopold says, "is that one lives alone in a world of wounds"--a claim that sounds a little like Christian existentialism after all.

St. Benedict might read in the tree an allegory not just of inevitable change but of death, of the ephemeral quality of what we assume is real and inviolate. Andrew Louth, drawing on the philosophy of Hans-George Gadamer, says that this is the key to humanistic knowledge: we learn by suffering, we learn by dying to self, we learn by coming to accept our mutual interdependence.

In fact, maybe more than anything else, both Leopold and Benedict would see in the dying of my tree a figure of relationship. The ancient Christians celebrate what they call "the great economy," or the "economia," of creation--the divine dispensation, the order of time. The Bible itself is seen by the ancients as a system of interrelated symbols that can be entered at any point and read either forwards or backward--the Old and New Testament both understood in terms of each other--and every allegorical interpretation of this system leads to glimpses of a still deeper harmony, of God and of the cosmos he created and so loved as repeatedly to call it beautiful, repeatedly to call it good. The body and the soul are not necessarily at odds in the Judeo-Christian story. That's only one reading. Another is to see the body and the soul as Benedict does, as the sides of a ladder, as necessarily connected and leading, both of them, step by step, to beauty and light.

It's the serpent, after all, who tells Eve that to eat of the tree is to be like God. My best advice: don't listen to a snake. The prohibition in the garden can be more usefully (and more allegorically) understood as an ecological prohibition: what really defines the God of Genesis isn't power but self-limiting relationship. How else can the God of creation walk in the garden in the cool of the day? From this perspective the sin of Adam and Eve is that they fail to act like God, fail to maintain respectful distance, fail to maintain right relation. From this perspective dominion in the exploitive sense is only the result of the fall. It's the original sin.

Later Paul uses images of the body to invoke this sense of an original unity finally restored in Christ, of ecclesia and recapitulation, the gathering together of all people and all things into the one reconciling reality of the incarnation. Second and third century exegetes further develop such hints into the ecological image of the trinity, of the father always giving himself away to the son and the son to the father and the spirit to them both in what would be more aptly called a communionarchy than a hierarchy.

It's this communionarchy that monastic life seeks to imitate. The nearly communistic practices that Benedict outlines in his Rule are meant to mirror the absolute equality, the absolute ecology, of the Kingdom.

And all these figures of community are very close to Leopold's images of the

natural world. There is a harmony between the land and the self, Leopold repeatedly says. We are a part of a whole. "All ethics rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts." This is Leopold's gospel. This is what we all know of Leopold, if we know of nothing else.

My house on the edge of the forest. My minivan. All my loves and my longings, like Leopold's, like yours. And my tree, my dying tree, nearly bare now, exposed--a little like a ladder, come to think of it, a scraggly, branching ladder, extending just beyond the line of my picture window.

How would such an assignment be graded? What outcomes are we working for here--since at OSU in the 90's we always have to specify the proficiencies that we think we can teach, the skills we think we can measure in our students?

And with Wallace Stegner let's not be "overly optimistic" about this. "The number of functional illiterates that our public education produces," Stegner says in his essay on Leopold, "does not make us sanguine about educating a majority of the public to respect the earth, a harder form of literacy."

Still, perhaps there are gains to be made.

The great Jewish literary critic Robert Alter once said that what the Bible requires from its readers is both the closest attention to its formal details and an attitude of "intellectual humility." I like that statement, very much, for all of us, whatever texts we read, and I want to turn it around into a statement of objectives: the reason to require everyone to read the Bible is that the nature of its language encourages an attention to detail and a healthy sense of human limitation. Those are the skills to strive for: perception and modesty.

Leopold makes a strikingly similar claim for the values of the ecological education. At one point he calls recreational ecology "a job not of building roads into lovely country, but of building receptivity into the still unlovely human mind" (295). The goal of all education in landscape, he thinks, is to "promote perception" (290). That's the first part, what corresponds to Alter's emphasis on the fine attention to detail. Then Leopold says this:

Ability to see the cultural value of wilderness boils down, in the last analysis, to a question of intellectual humility. The shallow-minded modern who has lost his rootage in the land assumes that he has already discovered what is important; it is such who prate of empires, political or economic, that will last a thousand years. It is only the scholar who appreciates that all history consists of successive excursions from a single starting-point, to which man returns again and again to organize yet another search for a durable scale of values. It is only the scholar who understands why the raw wilderness gives definition and meaning to the human enterprise. (279)

"Intellectual humility." This is Robert Alter, this is the rabbinic hermeneutic, this is patristic exegesis, translated into the woods. And this, I think, is where ethical conduct

comes in. We can't start with ethical demand: telling people what they should do, forcing them to do it. Coercion never takes. Experience has to come first, felt knowledge, in this case the felt knowledge of how vast and complicated the world really is. And that knowledge stuns us. It stops us. It silences us. And it's at just that point that we stop doing damage, at least for a while. We're momentarily too overwhelmed to pick up a rifle or an axe, and when we do pick them up again, at least we've had a moment to consider why and if we really have to.

What do you do when you glimpse the ladder of light and all the angels walking up and down it, singing? You stand there awed, open-mouthed. You kneel. You build an altar, not a subdivision.

And you're so busy honoring and paying attention that you don't have time to point fingers and get into arguments and make judgments about other people. "The right of interpretation," the modern Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel has said, "is given only to one who covers his face," to "one who, when the vision is forced upon him, says, 'I am undone for my eyes have seen the King.'" Whatever ethical action follows from such experience of mystery, from such experience of the lifting of the veil, it's motivated by respect and joy and awe. It's a way of expressing loyalty to an event rather than of mandating certain feelings and behaviors.

Maybe Benedict was right that the meaning of Jacob's ladder is humility--that the point is always to "humble our hearts"--and maybe this is the final significance of every story in the Bible and the forest, whatever its smaller implications.

And maybe we can measure the effects of such an attitude after all, in hard numbers: in the number of trees left standing and species left alive, in the number of hate crimes and harassment cases reported each year--the number of special prosecutors and congressional hearings--the number of wars--in the number of real conversations we actually have, the number of conversations about what really matters, the conversations where we really listen, really learn, really come to understand all that we know and all that we can never know.